

The Same God?

The Perspective of Faith, the Identity of God, Tolerance and Dialogue

Christoph Schwöbel, Tübingen

*A paper presented at
the Yale Center for Faith and Culture consultation "The Same God?"
sponsored by the McDonald Agape Foundation*



Who's to decide?

The question whether Judaism, Christianity and Islam worship and believe in the same God is an intensely debated issue of theological reflection in each of the three traditions and one of the central topics of conversations between the three monotheistic religions often grouped together as the Abrahamic faiths. The declaration of the Second Vatican Council *Nostra Aestate* is often referred to as indicating that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. On closer inspection, however, a different and more complicated picture emerges. *Nostra Aetate* emphasises that all peoples are one community (*una communitas* Nr. 1), have one origin, since God let the whole of humankind live on earth (*unam habent originem cum Deus omne habent genus hominum inhabitare fecerit super universam faciem terrae*), and have one ultimate goal (*unum etiam habent finem ultimum, Deum...*). It also underlines that the various religions expect an answer to the riddles of the human condition, which culminate in the question of the ultimate and ineffable mystery of our existence, from which we have our beginning and toward which we strive (*quid demum illud ultimum et ineffabile mysterium quod nostram existentiam amplectitur, ex quo ortum sumimus et quo tendimus*). This, however, is not primarily an anthropological constant, an essential feature of the human condition, rather it is rooted in the fact that God's

providence and the testimony of his goodness as well as God's counsel of salvation extends to all peoples. There is a carefully balanced tension in these statements between emphasizing God as the one universal origin and goal of the whole of human kind, while at the same time stressing that the elect will be united in the Holy City, which will be illumined by the glory of God. The universality of the common origin and common goal is balanced by the emphasis on God's election, which, again, is balanced by stressing that all peoples will walk in the light of God's glory.

It is this theological framework which in *Nostra Aetate* provides the background for the anthropological statement that humans expect from the religions a response to the recondite enigmas of the human condition, even an answer to the ultimate mystery of the origin and goal of our existence. How is that to be understood epistemologically? Do the religions know that the origin and goal of all peoples is one and the same God? *Nostra Aetate* offers a complex and highly differentiated answer to the question: the same God? First of all, it is stated that from the earliest times until today there in all the diverse peoples some sort of perception (*quaedam perceptio*) of the hidden power which is present to the course of events in the world and to the events of human life. Sometimes there is even a certain recognition or acknowledgement (*aliquando agnitio*) of a highest Godhead, or even of a Father (*Summi Numinis vel etiam Patris*). This *perceptio* or even *agnitio* penetrates the life of the diverse peoples with an intimate religious sense (*intimo sensu religioso*). This is the reason why the religions strive to respond in subtle concepts and by means of a highly developed language to respond to the same questions (*ad easdem quaestiones respondere satagunt*). As far as I can see this is the only explicit identity claim that is made in *Nostra Aetate*. Do we have to conclude that *Nostra Aetate* avoids claiming

that the religions worship the *same God* while explicitly stating that they attempt to provide an answer to the *same questions* concerning human existence, a question which is rooted in their perception and even recognition of a divine power?

Nostra Aetate presents the religions in a perspective of concentric circles, a method also used in other documents of Vatican II, starting from the outer circles and proceeding to the inner circles. In Hinduism people scrutinize the divine mystery (*hominis mysterium divinum scrutantur*) in express it in the form of mythologies, philosophical reflections, ascetic life-styles and meditation. Seeking refuge in God with love and confidence is also seen as one of the expressions of this scrutiny of the divine mystery. In Buddhism, recognition of the radical insufficiency of the mutable world leads to teaching a way how people can attain perfect liberation or the highest illumination. It should be noted that *Nostra Aetate* does not claim that this is what Buddhists and Hindus seek, do or strive for, but that it is what people in Hinduism and Buddhism attempt to attain. It is, it seems, not a statement of what Hindus and Buddhists of the various sects would describe as their self-understanding, rather it is a description from the perspective of Catholic Christian faith, based on the notion that all humans expect answers to the riddles of the human condition and the mystery of our existence from the religions. With regard to other religions mentioned unspecifically in the same circle it is simply said that they strive to meet the restlessness of the human heart (Augustine's famous metaphor) in various way by teaching, precepts for living and holy rites.

The summary statement is again finely balanced: The Catholic Church does not reject anything which in these religions is true and holy (*nihil eorum, quae in his religionibus vera et sancta sunt*). It considers with sincere attention (*sincera observantia*)

the modes of action and living and the precepts and doctrines, which these religions represent. The reason for this attitude is that they often (*haud raro*) refer a ray of that Truth which illumines all humans, although the teachings of these religions show in many ways discrepancies from what the Catholic Church itself holds and proposes. If we try to unpack this statement we have to say that the Catholic Church does not reject anything that is true and holy in the religions because it recognises that what is true and holy in them refers to the Truth, which illumines all people. We find here a referential criterion for assessing what is true and holy in other religions. Although there are many discrepancies in the doctrines, precepts etc. of the religions from what the Catholic Church itself teaches, it recognises nevertheless a ray of the Truth that illumines all humans. The basis for this view is the common origin and goal of all humankind in God, which lets all people strive for an answer to the mystery of human existence, the perception and even recognition of this hidden divine power in the religions and the eschatological expectation that in the end, when the elect will be united in the Holy City, which is illumined by the Glory of God, all people will walk in the light of this glory.

However, in addition for a basis for such a referential view we need a criterion to assess what refers to the Truth and in what way it refers to it. The criterion offered in *Nostra Aetate* is Christological: The Catholic Church proclaims Christ who is “the way, the truth and the life”, in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled the World with himself. This seems to suggest that the fullness of truth can be found in Christ as well as the way by means of which we can attain it. While the referential basis makes sure that all religions can refer to the one divine truth, the referential criterion allows the Catholic Church to ascertain to what extent they refer to the one truth. This is

the basis for the exhortation to all Catholics for conversation and cooperation with the religions as well for recognising, preserving and promoting the spiritual and moral goods as well as the socio-cultural values they find in them by witnessing to Christ in faith and in life.

This is *prima facie* a somewhat bewildering statement. However, if Christ is the criterion of truth and therefore the content of Christian witness, Christ is also the Criterion for recognising, preserving and promoting spiritual and moral good, as well as socio-cultural values Catholics find in other religions.

When we now turn to what *Nostra Aetate* says about Muslims we find a number of remarkable changes in comparison to the treatment of Hinduism and Buddhism. *Nostra Aetate* does not state what people do in Islam as it states what people do in Hinduism or Buddhism but says that Muslims adore the only God, the living and subsisting, the merciful and omnipotent the creator of heaven and earth who has spoken to humans (*unicum deum, viventem et subsistentem misericordem and omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae, homines allocutum*). This statement is supported by a reference to Gregory VII. letter to Al-Nasir, the King of Mauritania which also asserts that Muslims and Christians believe and confess one God, "albeit in different ways". The interesting feature here is that the text emphasises the points of referential convergence between the Christian understanding of God and the Muslim understanding of God, but does so in a way that gives precedence to what Muslims would stress in their understanding of God, the singularity and unity of God, that God is living and self-subsistent, merciful and omnipotent, that God is creator of heaven and earth and has spoken to humans. What we see here is reference by definite description, offering descriptions on which Christians and Muslims agree. These descriptions specify Muslim

worship. This seems particularly apt because acts of worship are shaped by the object of worship and have the same referential logic, which seems to be applied throughout *Nostra Aetate*. With regard to the first statement of the treatment of Islam in section 3 we can say that referential convergence establishes propositional consensus.

In what follows, this referential logic is applied to central aspects of Islamic Faith. In this way *Nostra Aetate* states that Muslims try hard to submit with all their soul to the hidden counsels of God, just like Abraham submitted himself to God, Abraham to whom Muslim faith likes to refer. By referring to submission to God, to *islam*, *Nostra Aetate* can take up Muslim self-understanding by seeing it exemplified in Abraham to whom both Christians and Muslims (and, of course first and foremost, Jews) refer. This reference to Abraham, however, leaves it open that Christian and Muslims refer to Abraham in different ways, although both see him as exemplary for the human relationship to God.

When *Nostra Aetate* mentions Jesus and Mary, the document explicitly states the differences between Muslim and Catholic views with regard to Jesus and implicitly with regard to Mary. Concerning Jesus it says that he is venerated as a prophet by Muslims but not acknowledged as God (*quidem ut Deum non agnoscunt*), and that marks a decisive difference in the view of Mary, although Muslims can invoke Mary in prayer, which Protestants, for instance, would hesitate to do. The expectation of the Last Judgement and of resurrection of the dead is also mentioned – so it seems – as a point of agreement. The last element of the description of Islamic religion mentions prayer, alms-giving and fasting.

It is quite clear that this a description of Islam from a Christian perspective, which interprets Islam as a form of believing in the one God on the basis of the criteria of Christian faith, what we have called the referential basis and the referential criterion. By

focussing on the points of convergence in understanding God as the object of reference of Christian and Muslim faith it is therefore suggested that Muslims and Christians worship the one and only God, however differently. This difference in Muslim worship and belief is, from a Christian perspective, a deficiency. However, if one concentrates on that which would suggest a “referential identity” in Muslim and Christian faith in God, as it is expressed from a Christian perspective, this also implies – from a Muslim point of view – that the description of Islam is deficient. It neither mentions Muhammad nor the *Hadj*. Referential convergence or identity, i.e. convergence or identity with regard to the referent, does not exclude deficient description – for either of the two perspectives. However, it is clear that the Council does not expect the religions to meet on the basis of their respective deficiencies as they are perceived from either side, but on the basis of those shared elements which lead to the perception of deficiencies.

If we look at the conclusion of the paragraph on Islam it is clear that what has been stated is in the view of the Council sufficient to offer an exhortation to “all” (*omnes*), in view of the dissent and inimical relations between Muslims and Christians in history, to leave the past aside, to work for mutual understanding (*ad mutuam comprehensionem*) and protect and promote together (*communiter*) social justice and moral goods, not least, peace and freedom for the whole of humankind. The wording seems to suggest that what has been mentioned as a convergence in Christian and Muslim faith is sufficient to call for mutual understanding and communal engagement for justice, moral goods, peace and freedom. This is presented as a step into the future, leaving aside the struggles of the past. One could say that *Nostra Aetate* does not so much seek to establish a common dogmatic ground between Catholic Christian Faith and Muslim faith but common ethical aims. However,

there is sufficient common ground, the alleged commonality of referring to the one and only God to address both sides (*omnes*) with the exhortation to exercise *mutual* comprehension and strive together (*communiter*) for common goals.

Does *Nostra Aetate* state that Christians and Muslims worship and believe in the same God? I think one could only say that *Nostra Aetate* states that Christians and Muslims worship the one and only God because there is only one God who is the origin and goal of the whole of humankind. There is thus an identity of reference, more precisely an identity of the referent (the object of reference) in the way Christians and Muslims understand God. According to *Nostra Aetate* this can be known from the perspective of the Catholic Church on the basis of the Christian understanding of God which defines the epistemic perspective from which the relationship to the religions is assessed. This identity of reference establishes a convergence of definite descriptions about the referent. This convergence, however, implies and requires only a partial consensus of descriptions. While part of the descriptions can be formulated in a partial propositional consensus, there is also a partial dissensus, and for each of the perspectives that makes the other perspective deficient. This deficiency, however, does not preclude the possibility, indeed, the need of mutual comprehension or the shared striving for common aims.

The apparent modesty of the claims suggested by *Nostra Aetate* points to the central issue of the question whether Christian and Muslims worship and believe in the same God. Who is to decide? The question seems to suggest that there could be a position *above* the different religious perspectives of the two religions. It seems to me that, at least before the *visio beatifica*, there is no such perspective. There is no view from nowhere. If there were, it would be irrelevant to the question because any answer that is not an answer given by

Muslims or Christians is quite irrelevant, since it could not help to shape the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Their mutual relationship can be shaped by Christians or Muslims only on the basis of grounds that are particular to their respective perspectives of faith.

One can also offer strong epistemological grounds that every kind of knowledge is bound to a particular perspective and must start from there. This is at least true, if we want to act on that knowledge. It is usually accepted that finite agents must act from somewhere, from a particular standpoint of action. What is accepted as unproblematic with regard to action, applies in the same way to knowledge – at least if it is the kind of knowledge on the basis of which we are prepared to act. Therefore there can be no abstract criteria of ‘sameness’, which could function apart from any particular epistemic perspective. Even logical criteria of sameness have to be applied from some perspective to a particular problem as it appears from that perspective. The grounds that can be offered for either stating sameness or difference will therefore depend on the way they appear from a particular perspective.

The obvious objection to this emphasis on the epistemic significance of perspectives for any kind of knowledge is that it leads to a kind of relativistic perspectivism, which is often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche. This perspectivism takes its most radical form, if it is suggested that each perspective constitutes incommensurable ways of looking at reality or even expresses different realities. If that were the case, it would neither be possible to state from a particular perspective a universal truth claim nor to contest what is claimed from one perspective from another. The latter is of course the demise of all truth claims because propositions can only claim truth if their negation is wrong. This kind of

relativistic perspectivism is the end of all communication, which depends on the law of non-contradiction that p and not- p cannot have the same truth value (or: $\neg \{A \ \& \ \neg A\}$).

How is the slippery slope of perspectivistic relativism to be avoided? This can only be done if an epistemic perspective does not present *another* reality, but *another* perspective on the *same* reality, and if reality is understood in such a way that it is disclosed only for particular perspectives which can then engage in a debate about the truth of their respective claims to knowledge. Only if particular perspectives can be understood as being constituted by the subjective certainty concerning the objective truth of a view of reality it can avoid the twofold pitfalls of perspectivistic relativism or a general scepticism which claims that generally no certain knowledge of reality can be gained. If the question of truth in the realist sense of the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* is suspended, either because one opts for a relativistic perspectivism or for a general scepticism with regard to all truth claims, then disputes can no longer be debated and approached through the exchange of arguments which are tested against the phenomena of our experience. Every contest of different views becomes a power struggle, which ultimately will be resolved by violence.

These epistemological considerations underline the significance of the question: the same God? If God is the creator of heaven and earth, the ground of all reality, as both Muslims and Christians believe, then the concept of God guarantees the unity of reality. Therefore it would be disastrous if Christians and Muslims would agree that they worship and believe in different gods. This would mean either that Christians and Muslims live in different realities or that there is no unitary ground of all reality. Both possibilities would not allow for a meaningful debate between Muslims and Christians with a chance for

mutual understanding (even, if it is an understanding of their differences) and for a successful cooperation for common goals, which are recognised by both sides (though, perhaps, on different grounds) as good. However, if it is claimed that Christians and Muslims worship and believe in the same God while they continue to claim either the Qur'an or Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of truth respectively, and both hold that these beliefs are incompatible, this undermines any truth claim that could be associated with God or any meaningful use of the notion of "sameness" and "otherness". The only way out of the dilemma seems to be to insist on the oneness of God and emphasize at the same time that this oneness can only be asserted in different ways from Christian and the Muslim perspectives so that there can be a real debate on which view of God is true (and the other, at least, partially wrong). Whereas agreement on the oneness of God is a necessary condition for cooperation in the same reality, consensus in the debate about the sameness of God is not. People can cooperate for the achievement of common goals in the same reality while having very different reasons for it. So, who is to decide? The obvious answer is: Only Christians and Muslims can decide from their different respective perspectives of faith.

The Christian Perspective of Faith and the Identity of God

How should Christians then decide from the perspective of Christian faith? This would presuppose to clarify a little more precisely what the perspective of Christian faith is. It is one of the central convictions of Christian faith that the constitution of faith is not a human work, but a work of God the Holy Spirit. Faith is passively constituted *for* humans and not

actively constituted *by* humans. However, once faith is passively constituted it is to be actively exercised in the life of faith. Martin Luther has expressed the passive constitution of faith most succinctly in the explanation of the Third article in the *Small Catechism*:

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.”

What is described here as the constitution of faith by the work of the Holy Spirit is commonly summarized by the technical concept of “revelation”. This technical concept, which was introduced in late medieval times, expresses the mode of knowledge which is constituted for us by a disclosure experience which constitutes personal certainty of faith. It enables us to become certain about something, which we could not actively make known to us. This disclosure experience occurs contingently and affects the whole of our personal being in the world, it grants insight into our existence as personal beings with finite conditioned freedom. Let me state quite bluntly that I believe that the concept of revelation only makes sense if we do not restrict it to a specific religious realm but see it as denoting the general way in which we the foundations of our active knowing are constituted for us. In this sense I would argue for a general theory of revelation and not necessarily for a theory of general revelation.

The passive constitution of Christian faith has a deep significance for the relationship of Christian believers to adherents of other religions who also claim that their religious relationship to God or the ultimate focus of meaning is passively constituted for them and not actively produced by them. It seems to me a decisive characteristic of

religions as opposed to ideologies that they claim that their insight is disclosed to them and cannot be actively achieved by human beings. This is the reason why only religions, which know that the insight of faith is passively constituted, can grant one another freedom of religion. The insight of Christian faith into its own constitution, as it is expressed in Luther, is at the same time a decisive self-limitation. On the basis of this insight, Christians know that they can neither create their own faith nor that of others. Creating faith remains exclusively a divine work. However, if this account of the constitution of certainty is true, Christians are committed to the view that this constitution of certainty is not just a special Christian case but applies to all other certainties and to other religious certainties as well. The insight into the constitution of their own faith therefore implies the commitment to tolerate the certainties of others, including that of other religions, since they must suppose that what they claim to be revelation has been disclosed to them in just the same way – although it has not become a revelation for me as a Christian.

The specific content that is disclosed in the revelation which is the foundation of Christian faith is the relationship of our personal being to the ground, goal and meaning of all created existence. In Luther's explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit it is called the Gospel. The Gospel is both promise and narrative, the narrative of the person and work of Jesus Christ. What is made certain by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is a story that can be told, it is the external word, a message proclaimed in the sign system of human language which has a propositional content and makes definite truth claims. The certainty of faith therefore does not concern some arcane knowledge but a message that can be handed on and understood by the normal means of human communication. Its content is the reconciliation between God and the world, the healing of the broken relationship

between God the creator and his estranged human creatures as it is witnessed in Scripture. Certainties cannot be communicated or handed on. They are always person-relative. The truth about which believers are certain can be communicated, albeit not as a vindicated truth claim but as a truth claim. It is this message that is publicly communicable and publicly contestable. This is a matter of Christian witness as well as of interreligious dialogue. Conversation about this message is the medium of discursive rationality for Christians, also in their conversations with other religions.

However, what is witnessed in the Gospel of Christ or the message of reconciliation is a message that concerns the relationship of God the creator to his creation, it is a message about the constitution, character and meaning of the whole of reality. The reality to which the message refers is grounded in the faithfulness of the creator which re-established created freedom by faith in Jesus Christ. Over against the dislocation of sin in the relationship of humans to God, the Gospel is that they are relocated in the relationship to the one who is the creative ground, the reconciling power and the perfecting goal of everything there is. The reality of creation is therefore the field where the perspective faith is vindicated and challenged in our dealings with reality. The constant question is: What difference does it make for our understanding of and action in the world that the world is God's creation, that we are destined to exercise our created freedom as God's creatures and as created images of divine freedom through the active self-determination of created freedom. It is this reality of our experience of living in the world as it is understood from the perspective of Christian faith as being shaped by God's creative, reconciling and perfecting love which provides the testing-ground for the life of faith. The reality of creation, which we share with all other creatures and also with the believers of other

religions is therefore the framework where the truth of faith is put to the test, where it is vindicated and where it is challenged.

The internal structure of Christian faith, which connects the personal certainty of faith with the public truth claims of the Gospel and with the reality to which these truth claims refer is seen in Christian faith as one structured divine economy which has its unity in the action of the triune God. This whole process from the illumination of the human heart through the Gospel of Christ and further to the will of God the creator shows us one unitary, yet differentiated structure of divine action, which connects creation, reconciliation and sanctification. One of the earliest but also clearest expressions of this connection can be found in Paul: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor 4:6) God who is the creator of the primordial light of creation is the one who also illumines our heart so that we can see the glory of God in the face of Christ. There is therefore a comprehensive logic in God's creative action that culminates in the constitution of the knowledge of faith. The author ("the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness'") the content ("the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ") and the process ("who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge") of revelation or of the constitution of faith is one in these three distinctive acts.

Luther has summarized that in the exposition of the Third Article of the Creed in the *Large Catechism* in the following way:

"But here we have everything in richest measure; for here in all three articles He has Himself revealed and opened the deepest abyss of his paternal heart and of His pure unutterable love. For He has created us for this very object, that He might redeem and sanctify us; and in addition to giving and imparting to us everything in heaven and upon earth, He has given to us even His Son and the Holy Ghost, by whom to bring us to Himself. For (as explained above) we could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favour of

the Father except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the paternal heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But of Christ we could know nothing either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost.”

What is described here in the language of the threefold divine self-giving or God’s threefold gratuitous generosity is, according to Luther, not just the inner logic of divine action, but the depiction of God’s Trinitarian being which can be described by speaking of the personal acts of the persons of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is based on God’s Trinitarian self-presentation, which comprises the author, the content, the process and the effect of divine revelation. As such the doctrine of the Trinity is needed to give a complete account of how the constitution of faith enables the act of faith in such a way that the act of faith is enabled and the content of faith is given in God’s Trinitarian self-giving.

Let us not avoid the harsh conclusion, which Luther draws from this:

“These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and separate us Christians from all other people upon earth. For all outside of Christianity, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, although they believe in, and worship, only one true God, yet know not what His mind towards them is, and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him; therefore they abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they have not the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favoured by any gifts of the Holy Ghost.”

The Trinitarian faith is here depicted as a radicalisation of faith in one God, which also exists outside Christianity. Trinitarian faith is radical monotheism. The insight of faith into God’s Trinitarian self-giving says that God is not only the source of the existence of the world, but also the one whose relationship to humans is revealed by Jesus Christ who as the “mirror of the paternal heart” shows us the “deepest abyss of His (God’s) paternal heart” as being His “pure unutterable love”.

God is as he presents himself in his threefold self-giving. On this basis Christians know that the one God, who is also believed by “Jews, Turks”, even by “false Christians and

hypocrites”, is in his relationship to his creatures, (“what his mind towards them is” – note: not only towards Christians) “pure unutterable love”. Not knowing this, because they do believe in Christ and the Holy Spirit, non-Christians “cannot expect any love or blessing from Him” and “abide in eternal wrath and damnation”. This is an astonishing conclusion. Luther says that non-Christians *have* the same God as Christians, because there is only one God and this God is the triune God who revealed himself in his threefold divine self-giving as “pure unutterable love”. However, because non-Christians do not believe in Christ and the Spirit they neither *recognise* the true character of God nor do they expect his love or blessing. Since they do not know God in the same way as Christians, they know God in a deficient form. They know God to be one but are not certain about his relationship to them and about what to expect from him. The conclusion is that, according to Luther, Jews and Muslims, even hypocrites and false Christians *have* the same God, although they do not believe in him or worship him. They do not get beyond the one God because they do not believe in Christ and the Spirit. However, that does not mean that God is for them another God, only that they perceive God without Christ as an “angry judge” and without the Spirit cannot “expect his love or blessing”. “Eternal wrath and damnation” is therefore the result of being in the wrong relationship to God, of not knowing God in the way God wants himself to be known.

Revelation, the Hiddenness of God and the Limits of the Knowledge of Faith

The implications of this view go beyond the way in which Luther himself was able to see the relationship between Christians, Jews and Muslims, other believers and non-believers. How should Christians approach the other religions if they take Luther’s view seriously

that they have the same God but that they do not know it. If all God's creatures have the same God it seems impossible to limit the economy of salvation to the Christian Church and leave the rest of the world to other powers. Since the God who is revealed in his threefold divine self-giving as the God of "unutterable love", this must apply to the whole relationship of God to the world although God can only be known where God makes himself known. How do Christians then relate to the other religions? It seems obvious to me that Christians cannot claim that God is the almighty creator of heaven and earth who is everywhere present to his creation and deny God's presence in the religions. In encountering the religions Christians expect the presence of God in them, the presence of the God who is, as they know God through his self-presentation in Christ and the Spirit, "unutterable love". However, Christians know from their own experience of faith that the presence of God is hidden in the world, it may be obscured by sin and unbelief, an experience they do not only make outside the church but also within the church, since only God knows who the true believers are. In encountering the other religions Christians therefore encounter the hiddenness of God as it is obscured through sin and unbelief, in the church as well as outside the church. It is, however, the hiddenness of the same God the Gospel proclaims. Therefore Christians will expect to experience the same God in new ways also in the religions. The only criterion they have for that is the Gospel of Christ, as the way in which Christians believe God revealed himself. The other religions are therefore for Christians neither a Godless zone, nor enemy territory. Christians cannot see the existence of the religions as an operating accident in the history of salvation. What the precise role of the religions is in God's providence has remained hidden until now, but that they must have a

role is clear from what Christians believe about the presence of the almighty creator to the whole of creation.

Is there a way of dealing with the tension between God's particular revelation which nevertheless has a universal import and God's general hiddenness which, however, seems to have a particular meaning although it may elude us now? We can again try to get some inspiration from Luther. In the concluding paragraphs of *On the Bondage of the Will* Luther employs the popular and good distinction (*vulgata et bona distinctio*) between the light of nature (*lumen naturae*), the light of grace (*lumen gratiae*) and the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*). Luther employs this distinction in order to deal with the dialectics of the knowledge of faith. By the *lumen naturae* we can know that there is a God. However, this light, which Luther frequently equates with reason, cannot help us with the riddles and challenges of our experience in the world. Why should it be just that good people suffer and bad people enjoy a good life? The light of grace tells us that God's justice is not identical with the justice of the world but is a creative and transformative justice. Therefore God's ultimate justice is not yet executed since this life is only the beginning of the future life. However, there still remains, even in the light of grace, the question why God should condemn those who by their own powers can do nothing but sin. The light of nature and the light of grace cannot fathom why God should give the crown to a godless person without any merits and possibly does not crown or even condemns somebody who is not more godless or even less godless. However, this insoluble difficulty shall be clarified in the *lumen gloriae* where God's justice that is now incomprehensible will be made fully manifest.

This distinction clearly suggests limits of the knowledge of faith, which is bound to the light of nature and its transformation in the light of glory. The light of grace only knows that God saves those who are lost because of their estrangement from God, and this transformative justice we can now hope in faith will shown to be victorious in the light of glory. How God will disclose himself as the same God, the God who is now known only by the light of grace, remains hidden until God discloses himself fully to everybody. There is a kind of epistemological modesty involved here which does not presume upon the revelation of the light of God's glory.

It seems to be one of the special characteristics of Christian faith that it does not expect the implementation of the truth of faith for all people within history. The goal of history is not that all people will become Christians. The full revelation of God's truth will occur at the end of history. In history we continue to live under pluralistic conditions, and therefore our efforts must be directed at managing the pluralistic situation in the light of faith's apprehension of God's character and of the human destiny.

Tolerance, Dialogue and Cooperation

We have already seen that the insight into the constitution of their own faith as passively constituted for them obliges Christians, if this insight is true, to assume that this is also true for other believers. There is therefore a tolerance on the basis of faith, which respects and tolerates the faith of others. Contrary to the demand for tolerance, as it has been suggested by the Enlightenment, which is based on the uncertainty of religious faith this kind of tolerance is based on the certainty of faith. The grounds for this tolerance can

therefore be found in the traditions of the different religions. However, on the basis of such a view of the religious roots of tolerance, believers of different religions are not confronted with the demand to be less religious so that they can be more tolerant. Rather, it encourages believers to discover in their own traditions the grounds for being tolerant towards others. In this way, it encourages them to be more religious in order to become more tolerant.

A similar perspectival reasoning can be applied to the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue has far too long been conducted under the expectation of some sort of consensus, which should be achieved by means of dialogue. If, however, we start from the respective perspectives of faith we should not engage in conversation with other religions with the (rather oppressive) expectation of reaching some kind of consensus but with the expectation of gaining a better understanding of our differences. This requires that in interreligious dialogues the different religions encounter one another on the basis of their respective self-interpretations (independence condition) and then try to engage in conversation on the basis of their respective understandings of the other (interdependence condition). This provides the opportunity of correcting our understanding of the other through engagement with the other's self-interpretation. There is no *given lingua franca* for this kind of exchange but only the patient way of understanding the other by the analogical extension of our own perspective of faith. It will involve techniques of translation, translating the others beliefs into our own framework of understanding and attempting to translate our beliefs into the framework of other religions. It seems to me that we still have to discover the relevance of our respective

theologies and the riches of our respective traditions as resources for a dialogue with others.

That seems to me to be especially true for Christian – Muslim relations. What would it mean for Christians to understand the intricacies of Koranic exegesis? What would it mean for Muslims to appreciate that Christian faith is not concerned with a Trinity of God, Jesus and Mary but with the Father, the Son and the Spirit? How should Christians (and Muslims) view the fact that the mystic Abu Hasan Ali Ibn Ahmad ad-Dailami (10./11. century) offered an intricate argument why oneness and threeness do not have to be contradictory, since the lover (the mystic), God (the beloved) are united in the one love? How should Muslims and Christians and Jews, each from their own perspective of faith, interpret the verses from the Qur'an:

For each of them we have established a law,
and a revealed way.

And if God wished,

God would have made you a single nation;

but the intent is to test you

in what God has given you.

So let your goals be everything good.

Your destiny, everyone, is to God,

Who will tell you about

that wherein you differed. (5, 48; Cleary 55)

The aim of dialogue, it seems to me, will not be a dogmatic consensus. However, much would be gained, if it prepared the ground for a cooperation of the religions, especially

Jews, Christians and Muslims for those aims, which they, from their respective perspectives, recognise as common good. This cooperation will not be based on the recognition of common ground which for all three monotheistic religions seems very different, but it can be aimed at realizing common goals which will be justified within each tradition by different grounds. Is that the way in which the three monotheistic religions can follow the injunction: "So let your goals be everything good"? An exhortation remarkably similar to that of Paul: "...test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5: 21).

We have arrived at a curious conclusion. From the Christian perspective it seems we have to say that Jews, Christians and Muslims *have* the same God – and this statement would be underlined by Jews and Muslims from the perspective of their respective faiths. However, they each would emphasize that the others do not worship or believe in this God in the same way, because God has been revealed to them, according to their self-understanding, in different ways, which, from each of the perspectives, creates a real difference in worship and faith. However, this difference would not seem to exclude that we live in the *same world*, interpreted from our different perspectives, in which we have to act together for our common good.